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The Adventures of Thomas-Alexandre Dumas



Catherine Johnson

Illustrated by Rachel Sanson

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PART ONE
SAINT-DOMINGUE



Chapter One

October 1775, Jeremie

"Benedict has always been free!" I glared at the new boy, Pierre. I did not shout. I tried to make my voice sound like his foul words didn't matter.

My friends on the beach had skin of all colours, some lighter, some darker than mine. We all came here most days when the sun was cooler, to ride our horses on the sand. There were Dan and Henri, who were fishermen's sons. And Georges and Jean, whose fathers, like mine, ran coffee farms. Benedict, who was darkest of all, had a mother who ran a bar on the main street; he had better clothes than any of us, but never made any fuss about it.

"Well, you are all no *better* than slaves." Pierre sat tall in his saddle and looked round at the group. "In France, we call you scum."

"Shut up, Pierre!" Benedict kicked his horse into a trot and rode away down the beach. Pierre Despard, his face ham-pink from the sun, started laughing.

I pulled my horse, Merle, round to face him. "You think you are better than us?"

"Naturally. My father owns people like you. This horse cost more than any of you would fetch at market. I expect even my boots—"

"You know what?" I said. I was fed up with this boy. "I will make a bet with you. I bet my horse can beat yours to the rocks and back."

He sneered.

Merle began to dance around. She could tell I was upset and snorted at me to calm down. I took a deep breath, settled myself. Pierre's horse looked expensive, it was the colour of the finest pastry and its mane and tail were white as sea foam. But I knew my Merle was faster. My father had given me Merle when I was seven, taught me how to train her, how to ride. I was nearly fourteen now. Merle and I had grown together, learned to work together as smoothly as if we shared the same breath. I knew she could beat him. She might not look as smart, but she would do anything for me.

Pierre said nothing for a long minute.

"Are you chicken?" Jean and Georges made clucking noises.

"Of course not!" Pierre turned his horse around. "I cannot lose!"

The wind whipped in from the sea and blew up some sand. It stung my eyes a little and it must have stung Pierre's horse too because she suddenly reared up on her hind legs. For a moment I thought he might fall – in fact it was hard not to enjoy the fear that flickered across his face. Some of the others laughed and we could all see just how angry that made him.

"You cannot best me!" Pierre spat, and kicked his horse on into a gallop.

He was at least four strides ahead of me, but I knew Merle could catch them.

"*Allez!*" I called, and Merle's ears pricked forward and she almost flew.

The sound of her hooves matched the sound of my heart. The sand flicked up with every step and the sea glittered silver. To my left, the hills of the island were the brightest green, and above, the blue of the sky was so bright you could not look at it for long. Merle stretched out even faster and I flattened myself against her back.

We overtook easily. I heard Pierre swear all the worst words I'd ever heard.

Up ahead a log lay directly in our path, half in and half out of the water. I gave Merle a tiny squeeze and she took off, leaping up into the air and across the

log. I would tell Papa about this when I got home, I thought; how high Merle had jumped, how fast she had run.

We'd almost reached the rocks when I heard a shout. I didn't look round at first, Pierre was full of tricks and I would not put it past him to cheat. To make it seem he was the winner whatever happened. But when I did look, it was as if the log had come to life. His horse reared again, swung round and screamed. If you have ever heard a horse screaming you will know it is a terrible sound.

I could see now that it was not a log. It was a caiman, longer than a man, snapping its huge jaws and thrashing its massive tail. Its teeth, I swear, were white and shining, and each one was as big as my forearm.

"Pierre!" I yelled. I hated the boy, but no one deserved to be eaten alive.

The other boys were all far away down the other end of the beach. I cupped my hands and yelled. "Serpentine!" I waved my hands like a snake. Pierre did not see. He did not even look at me. He and the horse were frozen with fear as the caiman's jaws snapped closer and closer.

If I did nothing there would be no horse and no Pierre.

I leaned forward and whispered into Merle's ears. "Come on." I felt her hesitate; she was afraid. I could feel her heart, fluttery under her ribs, beating ten to the dozen. But I squeezed her on, and we rode straight towards the boy and the horse and the snapping monster.

Without breaking stride, I leaned across as I got close and took his horse's bridle in my hand, pulling the terrified animal away from the caiman and leading it in a zigzag motion over the sand. The caiman tried to follow. Travelling in a straight line, those things can propel themselves up and down the beach faster than lightning, but side to side they are lumbering and slow.

Pierre was still praying when we reached the others and had almost stopped shaking. His perfect horse was rolling its eyes, its flanks heaving as it gulped down air. It would not stay still, and pranced and danced around. I thanked Merle with a pat and jumped down from the saddle to hold Pierre's horse. I sang soothing words in its ears, the words Papa had taught me from when he was a cavalry officer in the French army.

The horse calmed, tossing its head and nuzzling me. I smiled, I may not have a friend in Pierre but at least his mount appreciated me.

Suddenly all I heard was laughter. Pierre was laughing at me.

"Jungle boy!" he said, and at first I thought I hadn't heard him properly. "Are you speaking to my horse? Is it only animals that understand you?"

Henri was angry on my behalf. "Hey! Thomas beat you! He beat you and then he saved your life!"

Pierre scoffed. "He did it on purpose. He led me to that creature. I would have caught him if he hadn't. It was his fault. He could have killed me!"

I would have hit him then, but Henri held me back. "It's not worth it," he said quietly. I shook him off.

"You may look like a gentleman," I said, "but you are nothing."

Pierre looked down at me from the saddle.

"You are Antoine Delisle's son?" He said it as if I were a piece of rotting filth and not a boy. And he was sneering too. "Soon you will have nothing and you will be nobody." He took the reins and trotted away.

I was seething. I shouted after him, "You know nothing about me! About my family!"

"He's all mouth, that one," Henri said. But he did not look at me when he said it and I could not help feeling a shiver of worry. Papa had been too busy to